



Polarization, Generational Dynamics, and the Ongoing Impact of the Abuse Crisis:

Further Insights from the National
Study of Catholic Priests

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In October 2022, The Catholic Project at the Catholic University of America released initial findings from The National Study of Catholic Priests*, the largest survey of American Catholic priests in over fifty years. That study involved three primary components:

- **A survey of 10,000 Catholic priests, receiving 3,516 respondents across 191 dioceses/eparchies (36% valid response rate).**
- **In-depth qualitative interviews with more than 100 priests selected from survey respondents.**
- **A census survey of U.S. bishops, receiving 131 responses (67% valid response rate).**

Since the publication of initial findings from that survey, researchers at Catholic University and elsewhere have continued to study and analyze the data. This report highlights several themes which have emerged from closer analysis of the quantitative data, as well as careful study of the qualitative data collected from the one-on-one interviews with priests.

The three themes which are the focus for this report are:

Polarization

How does the increasing polarization of American society play out in the priesthood? How do priests' views on theological or political issues affect the way they relate to one another and to their bishops? How do priests' political views affect how they relate to one another or to their bishops? How much does trust differ among dioceses?

Generational Dynamics

How do priests who were ordained in the 1970s differ from newly-ordained priests? How do priests who were ordained before the sexual abuse crisis in 2002 differ from those who were ordained after it? How do the various generations within the priesthood view one another?

Ongoing Impact of the Abuse Crisis

How many of today's priests experienced sexual abuse, harassment, or misconduct while they were in the seminary? How many survivors of abuse have priests met and ministered to? How do priests understand their role in restoring trust after the crisis?

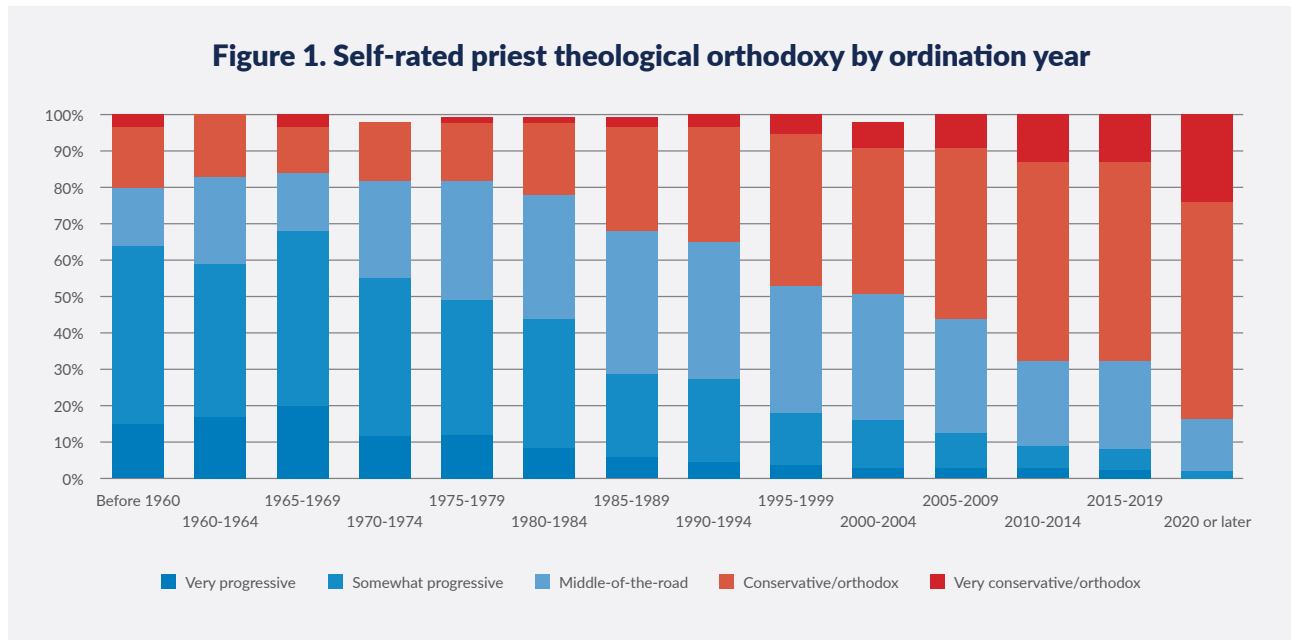
*Vaidyanathan, B., Jacobi, C., Kelly, C. R., White, S., & Perla, S. (2022). Well-Being, Trust, and Policy in A Time Of Crisis: Highlights from the National Study of Catholic Priests. *The Catholic Project*, October.

Polarization & Generational Dynamics

Political polarization in the United States has been a common and growing concern in recent years, as have concerns about growing polarization within religious communities including the Catholic Church. Our data does show a significant divide between the political and theological self-identification of older priests and younger priests.

Yet the data also suggests that the American presbyterate is, over time, becoming less polarized. Simply put, the portion of new priests who see themselves as politically “liberal” or theologically “progressive” has been steadily declining since the Second Vatican Council and has now all but vanished.*

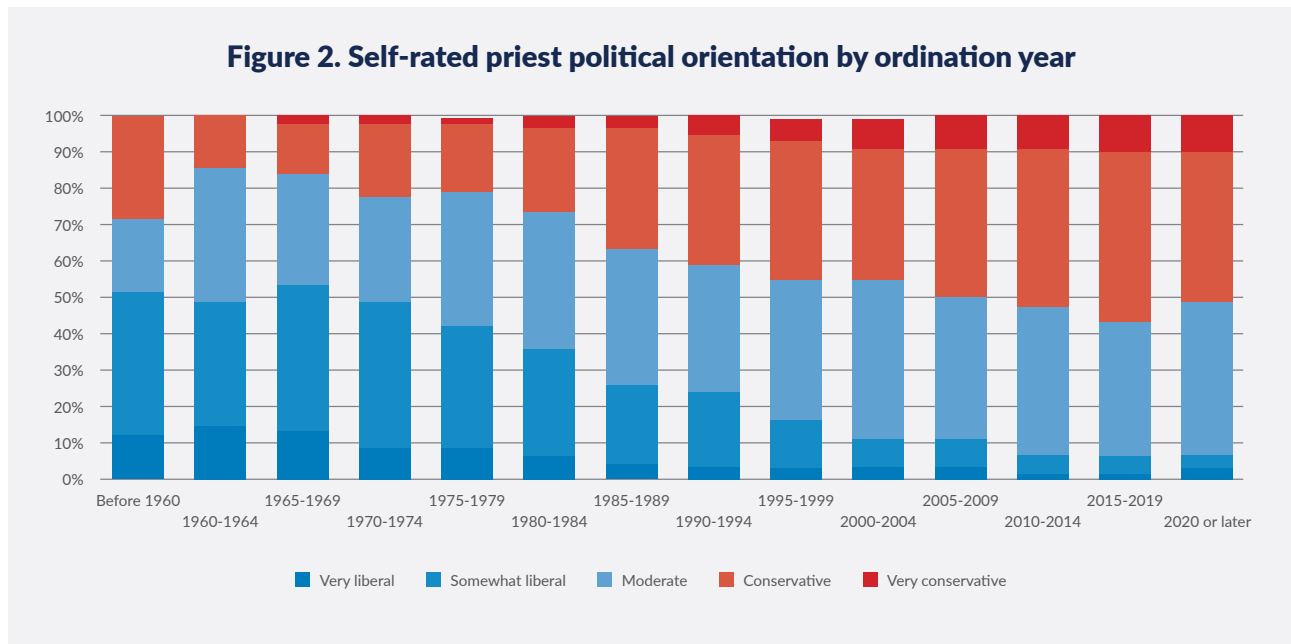
This decline is especially stark theologically. Asked to describe “their views on most matters having to do with theology and doctrines” on a scale from “very progressive” to “very conservative/orthodox,” there are significant cohort differences (Figure 1). More than half of the priests who were ordained since 2010 see themselves on the conservative side of the scale. No surveyed priests who were ordained after 2020 described themselves as “very progressive.”



Priests in their 70s and 60s now would be one cohort. And then you have the JPII-generation that would be very orthodox, but still have some, you know, free-flowing-liturgy-stuff. Then you get in the Benedict stuff which is like, you know, the hard-on-everything-kind-of-guys. And the young guys now, I'd say, you have a lot in common with those last few cohorts, but no one's really – the super-progressive wing really didn't replicate themselves.

See also: Vermurlen, B., Regnerus, M., & Cranney, S. (2023). The ongoing conservative turn in the American Catholic priesthood. *Sociological Spectrum*, 1-17.

Similarly, when priests were asked to describe “their views on most matters having to do with political issues,” the trend away from liberalism and toward moderate and conservative views is unmistakable (Figure 2).



One distinction is worth noting: While self-identification of this sort can give us an accurate view of how a respondent sees himself, it does not necessarily suggest an equivalence between like responses. For every response— “liberal” or “conservative”— there is always an unstated comparative element: “Progressive...compared to whom?” “Very conservative... in what context?” Our data tells us much about how priests perceive themselves relative to others, but tells us nothing about what makes one consider oneself “progressive,” “moderate,” “orthodox,” etc.

While the trends in political and theological self-identification bear some similarities—namely, the collapse of liberal or progressive self-identification—there are also notable differences.

The trend in political views seems to have stabilized to include a large proportion of “moderates.” While roughly half (52%) of the recently-ordained cohort described themselves as “conservative” or “very conservative,” a full 44% (the highest percentage of any cohort) self-described as “moderate.”

Contrast this to theological self-identification, where the “moderate” middle has not held. A full 85% of the youngest cohort describes itself as “conservative/orthodox” or “very conservative/orthodox” theologically, with only 14% (the smallest percentage of any cohort) describing themselves as “middle-of-the-road.” Theologically “progressive” and “very progressive” priests once made up 68% of new ordinands. Today, that number has dwindled almost to zero.

The causes and consequences of these shifts in the American presbyterate are no doubt complex. How these dynamics play out in interactions among priests in a given diocese or religious order is beyond the scope of this study.

However, our qualitative interviews suggested that priests themselves view these shifts through the lens of two watershed moments: the Second Vatican Council and the clergy sexual abuse crisis of 2002.



While it can look like a generational divide, it's really a theological, philosophical divide.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) is a dividing moment for the clergy: those who were familiar with the Church before the council see many things differently from those who were born after the council's changes were implemented.



People who are around my age...we lived through the pre-Vatican II world... Masses with the priests' back and in Latin. We knew that we experienced God in that, but we also knew that that had to change. And we saw with Vatican II, why... They want to go back to that. These kids have never experienced that. I think they think that there has to be this kind of mystery.

Similarly, the shocking revelations of clergy sexual abuse in 2002 are another watershed moment for the clergy in the U.S.

Pre- vs Post-2002 priests on crisis

Pre-2002 ordained

- "I liked the lifestyle of the priest and recognition and respect that the priest had."
- "I didn't have any idea as a seminarian [or] as a priest that there was such a thing as abuse."
- "The screening was not done properly."
- "I think my training in the seminary was incredibly inadequate."

Post-2002 ordained

- "This was a time that the Church needed good men."
- "There must be part of my vocation and my calling as a priest in this time that's not accidental. And the Lord intends to use me and my priesthood to help restore this and restore the trust and credibility of the priesthood for people."
- "Our rector said, 'You guys will spend your entire priesthood restoring trust.'"

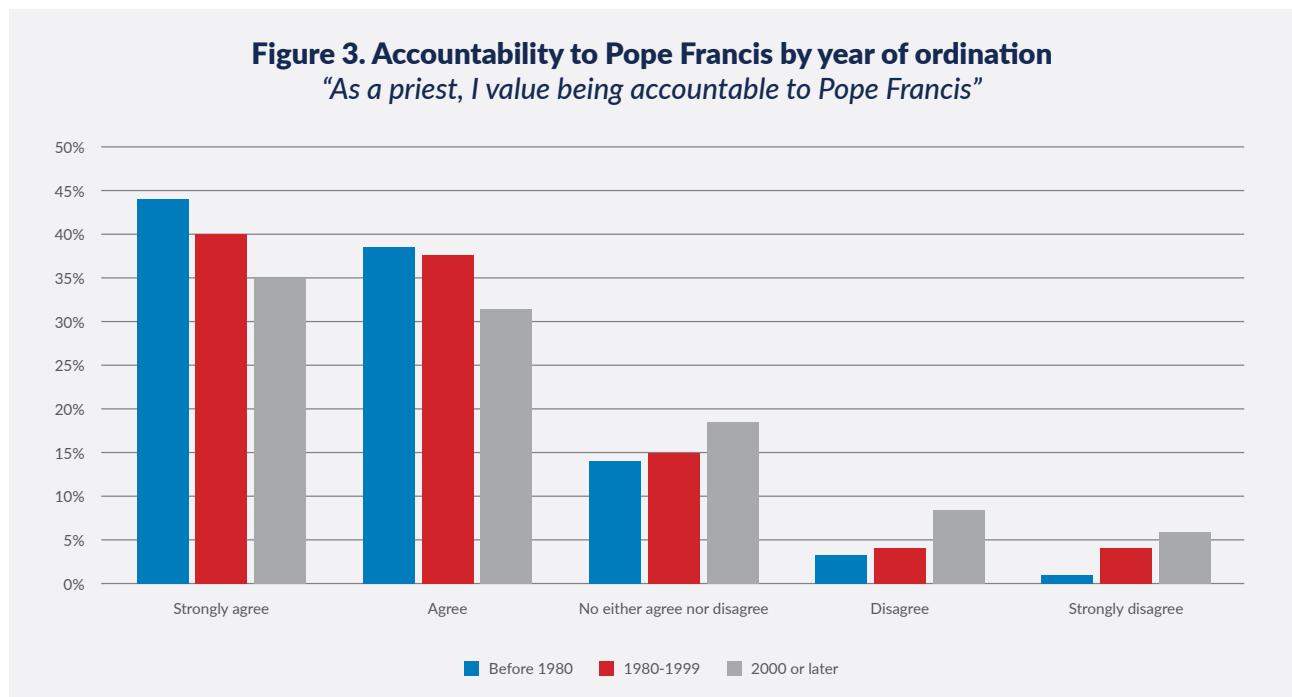
Accountability to the Pope

This significant shift toward a more conservative presbyterate has been seen in other studies.¹ In the context of the current pontificate (Pope Francis is often seen as more liberal or progressive than his immediate predecessors) the question arises whether there are discernable signs of tension between younger, more conservative priests and the pope.²

We asked survey participants whether they value their accountability to various people or parties: “God,” “Pope Francis,” “my bishop,” “my brother priests,” “my parishioners,” “the laity,” and “the general public.” Priests as a whole answer positively regarding their accountability to the Holy Father.

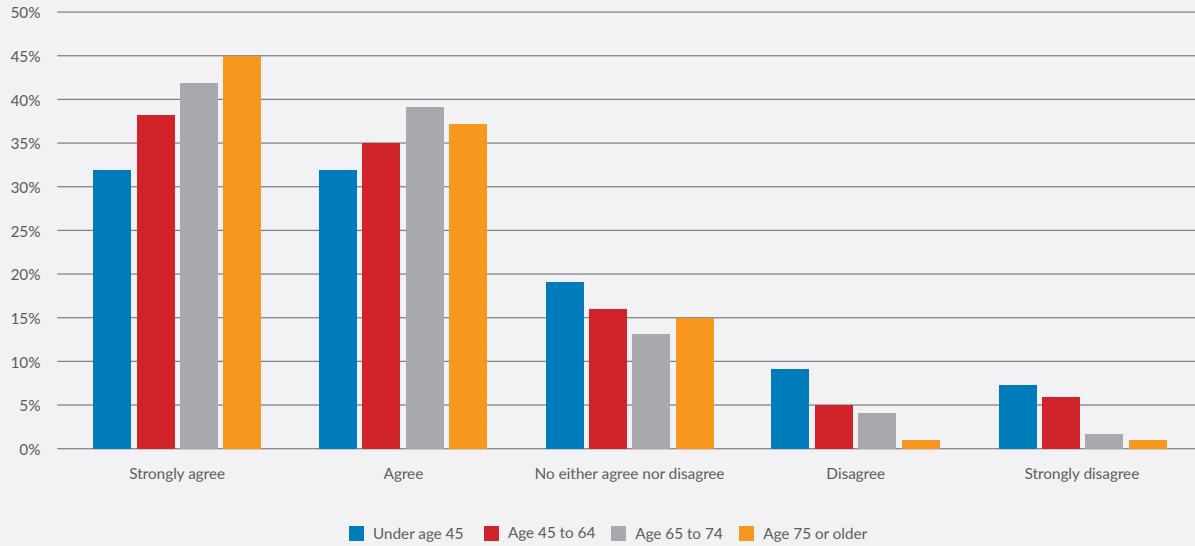
Responses do indicate generational differences and ordination-cohort differences, but these differences pale in comparison to the other generational shifts (Figures 3 & 4). 67% of priests in the cohort of priests ordained since 2000 agree that they value their accountability to the pope, versus 82% of those ordained before 1980. Similarly, 64% of priests under the age of 45 agreed that they value accountability to Pope Francis compared to 82% of priests over the age of 75.

But perhaps the most telling finding here is that, despite younger age and ordination cohorts trending more conservative/orthodox both politically and theologically, the overwhelming majority of these youngest priests do value accountability to Pope Francis.



1. See, e.g.: Vermurlen, Brad and Cranney, Stephen and Regnerus, Mark D., Introducing the 2021 Survey of American Catholic Priests: Overview and Selected Findings (October 28, 2021). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3951931> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3951931>
2. One prominent, older priest has publicly accused younger priests of, “only [being] loyal to the pope if he agrees with them.” <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-catholic-priests-are-increasingly-conservative-as-faithful-grow-more-liberal-11671343608>

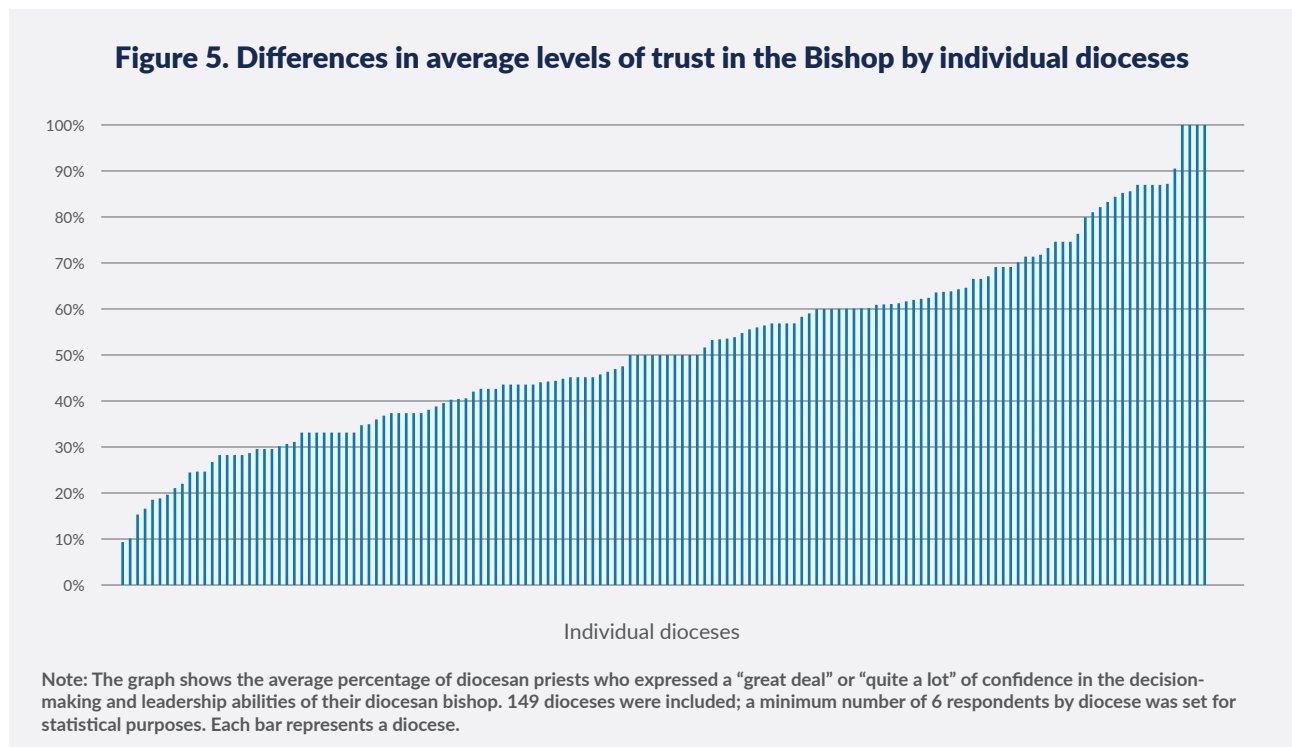
Figure 4. Accountability to Pope Francis by age of priest
"As a priest, I value being accountable to Pope Francis"



Trust differs widely

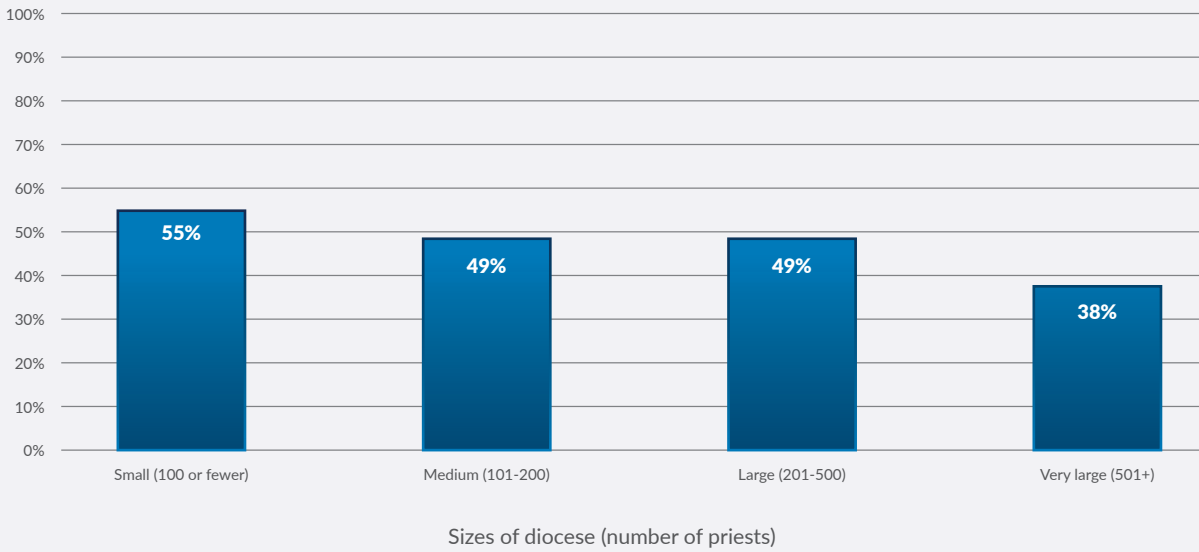
Although significant shifts in the theological and political outlook of American priests have not greatly affected their sense of accountability to Pope Francis, they do correlate with priests' confidence in their own bishop or religious superior.

In our initial report (October 2022), we paid considerable attention to priests' lack of trust in their bishops. We shared the data that showed that on average, 49% of diocesan priests today express high levels of confidence in the leadership and decision-making of their bishop. But going further into detail showed that mean levels of trust vary considerably across dioceses, with some dioceses doing well (100% trust) and others demonstrating trust levels as low as 9% (Figure 5).



Of course, some dioceses/eparchies have fewer than 100 priests while other, larger (arch)dioceses may have over five hundred. We found that diocesan size has a moderate effect on priests' trust in the bishop (Figure 6). One reason for this may be that priests in very large archdioceses do not personally know their bishops as well as priests in smaller dioceses, and may also feel depersonalized.

Figure 6. Trust in diocesan bishop varies moderately by size of diocese



Note: The graph shows the percentage of diocesan priests who expressed a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the decision-making and leadership abilities of their diocesan bishop.

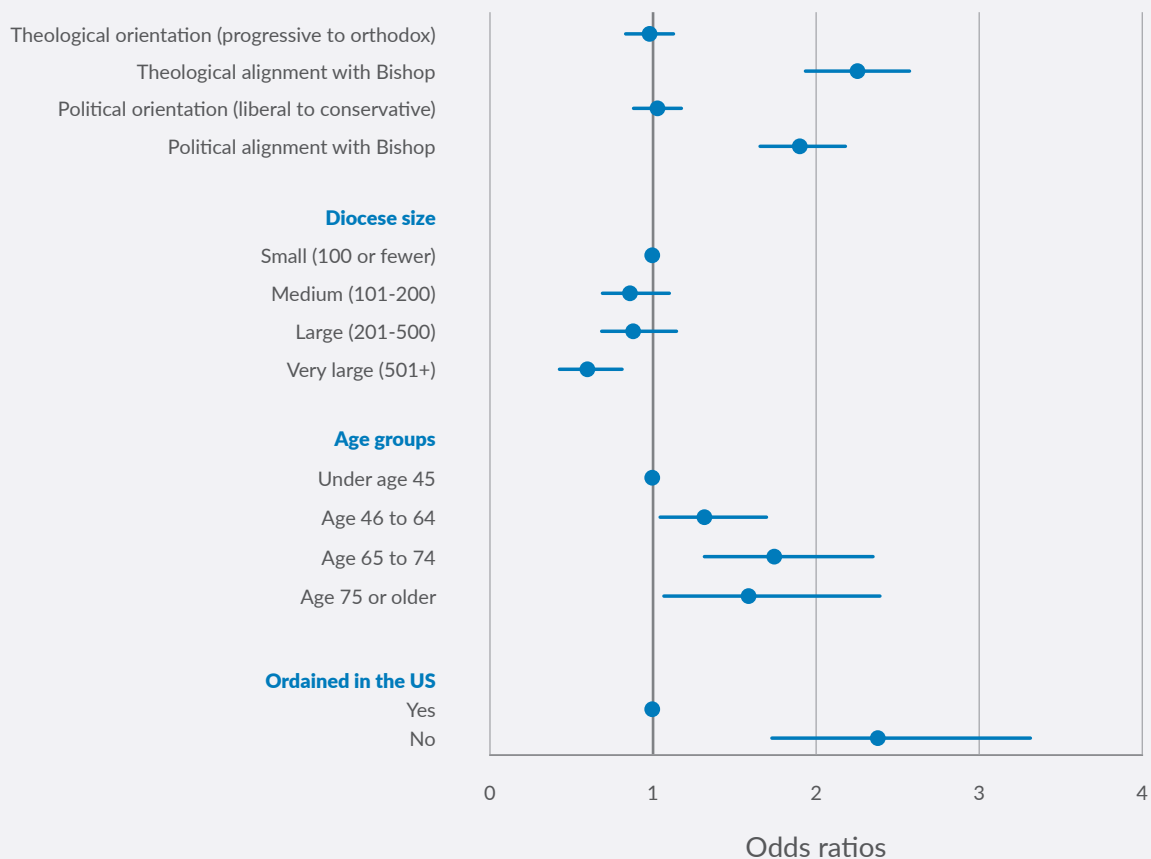


Trust and polarization

In a polarized environment, it is common for people to see others as either being on one’s “team” or not. In looking more closely at the data regarding priests’ trust in the leadership of their bishop, two factors are especially noticeable: perceived similarity of theological and political views.

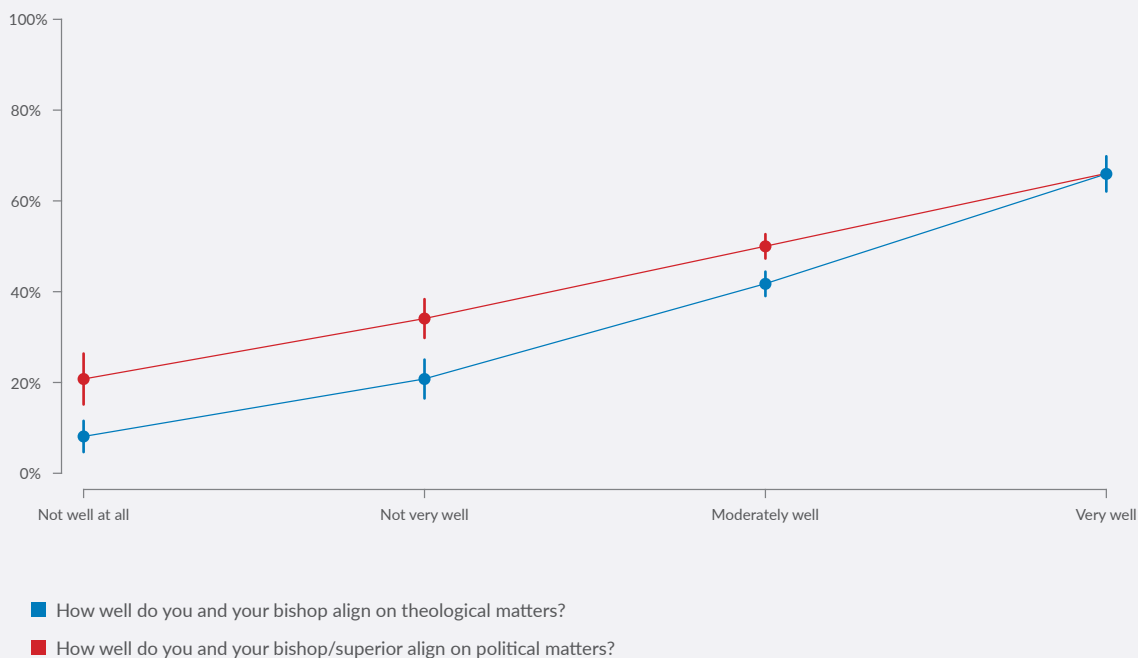
A priest’s perception that his bishop shared his theological and political views (or not) showed itself to be predictive of his level of trust in that bishop. If a priest describes himself as theologically conservative, for example, and he believes that his bishop is also theologically conservative, it is likely that he would report a high degree of trust in his bishop. In contrast, if a priest reported that he did not align with his bishop on theological matters, he would predictably report low trust in his bishop’s leadership; a similar line exists for political values (Figures 7 & 8).

Figure 7. What predicts trust in diocesan Bishops?



Note: Odds ratios with 95% confidence intervals of trust in Bishops; based on logistic regression (1= a “great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in the decision-making and leadership abilities of their diocesan bishop; 0=else). Odds ratios less than 1 represent lower odds of trusting the Bishop; values greater than 1 represent higher odds. Diocesan priests only. Where no confidence bar is present, that is the reference group in the categorical specification.

Figure 8. Probability of trusting the diocesan Bishop



Note: Predicted probabilities with 95% confidence intervals from logistic regressions of trust in Bishops (1=agree or strongly agree; 0=else) with controls (age group, size of diocese and an indicator for ordination in the US vs. foreign ordination, theological alignment, political orientation, theological orthodoxy). Diocesan priests only.

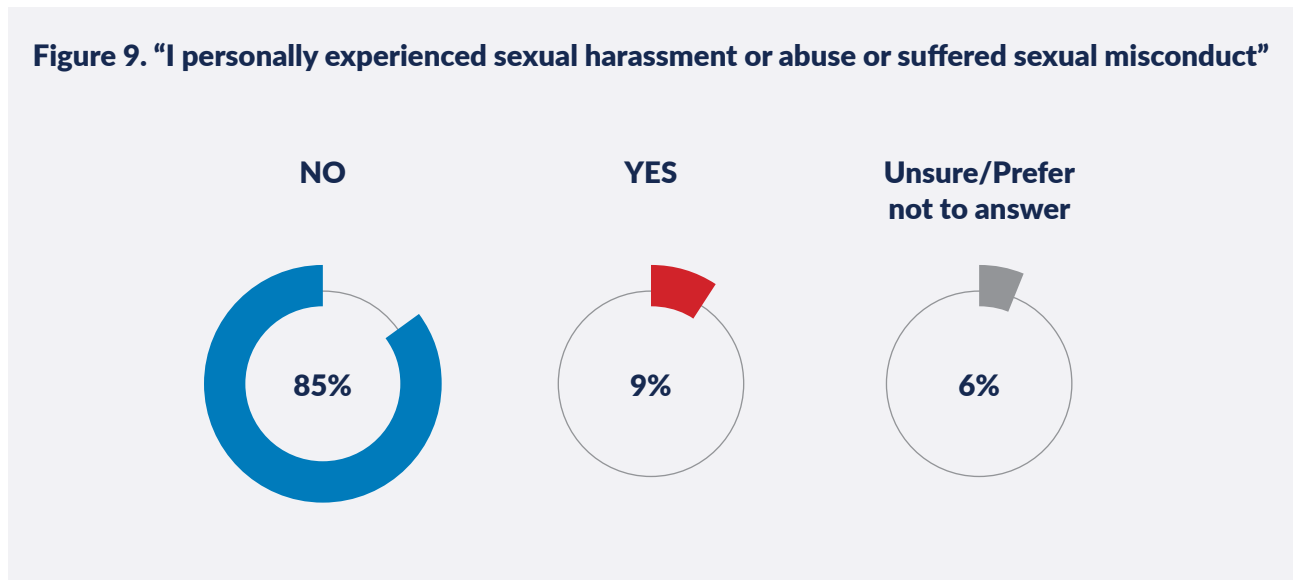


Priests' experience of abuse

Our initial report (October 2022) noted how priests in the U.S. live under the shadow of the clergy abuse crisis. They regularly fear being falsely accused and have doubts regarding how the process works and what support they could expect from their bishop or superior.

But priests have not only been perpetrators of sexual abuse; they have also been victims.

We asked priests to agree, disagree, or choose not to respond to the statement: "I personally experienced sexual harassment or abuse or suffered sexual misconduct during my formation or seminary" (Figure 9).



Personally, I am a victim. I was sexually abused while I was in seminary.

Priests as first responders

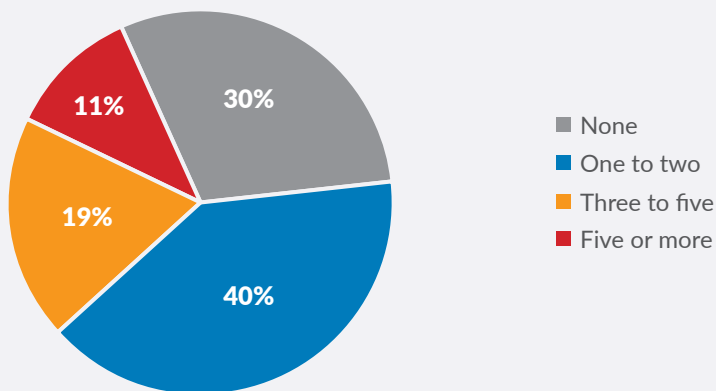
Priests also bear tremendous responsibility as a person likely to receive an abuse survivor's disclosure. Men and women who have suffered abuse at the hands of the clergy are in our parishes; priests, rather than bishops, are really on the front lines of responding to and seeking to heal the wounds of the crisis.



I had a friend who, unbeknownst to me, had been a victim of abuse from a priest, as a matter of fact. Early on, he revealed that to me. And so that certainly did change my perspective.

71% of priests report knowing at least one victim-survivor of clergy sexual abuse, with 11% knowing five or more (Figure 10).

Figure 10. The number of people priests know who were victims of clergy sex abuse



It's a heartbreaking thing. I have had conversations with people who have been victims of sexual abuse in general, but also clergy sexual abuse. And people who are actually serving in the Church as priests who themselves were abused. So it's the sadness of those conversations – and just holding that tragedy in my own heart, for those people who have been affected like that.

69% of priests say that they feel well-prepared to minister to a victim of abuse, and 54% report that they are already doing so (Figure 11).

Figure 11.



Priest Retention

One of the concerns that emerged in our initial report was the rate of symptoms of burnout, particularly in younger members of the clergy. We sought to identify what factors might show who is most at risk of abandoning their priestly ministry.

Despite the strain, most priests do not consider such a move. Altogether, **4%** of priests answered affirmatively to the statement, “I am thinking of leaving the priesthood.” While analyses are ongoing, some of the factors associated with a higher likelihood to consider leaving include lack of confidence in bishop leadership, priest age (younger), and perceived or actual lack of support.



Conclusion

We are witnessing a major shift in the way priests in the United States view themselves and their priesthood. Younger priests are much more likely than their older peers to describe themselves as politically conservative or moderate. Younger priests are also much more likely to see themselves as theologically orthodox or conservative than do older priests. These shifts can be a source of friction and tension, especially between younger and older priests.

Self-described liberal or progressive priests, considered both politically and theologically, have been declining with every successive cohort for more than 50 years. Self-described liberal or progressive priests have all but disappeared from the youngest cohorts of priests.

Differences in theological and political outlooks appear to relate closely to the degree of confidence priests have in the leadership of their bishops, though the levels of confidence from one diocese to the next vary dramatically, suggesting much more complex and locally significant factors at play.

In the context of the abuse crisis, a significant proportion of American priests say that they had “personally experienced sexual harassment or abuse or suffered sexual misconduct” during their formation or time in seminary. A large majority of priests (71%) know at least one victim of clerical sexual abuse. Only 30% of priests personally know three or more.

Against the backdrop of all these challenges, priests remain largely satisfied in their ministry and few (4%) are considering leaving.

Many of these trends have been decades in the making and show little sign of reversal any time soon. Building trust and restoring confidence begins with mutual understanding. It is our hope that the data presented here can strengthen that understanding among all Catholics, but particularly for our bishops and priests upon whom so much depends.



THE CATHOLIC PROJECT